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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the use of feedback in process-oriented second language writing instruction focuses on students' need for feedback, the most effective ways of providing it, appropriate timing for feedback, and how students use this information. Literature on feedback in process-oriented writing instruction is reviewed in light of each of these issues, and some suggested classroom responses to the research findings are outlined, including methods of giving feedback (reformulation, topical structure analysis, student self-monitoring, peer response) and ways of evaluating these methods for effectiveness. The role of learner strategy training in giving and using feedback is then explored briefly. In conclusion, the principles of effective feedback are summarized. Contains 27 references. (MSE)

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ED 417 581

# Students of process writing need appropriate and timely feedback on their work, and in addition, training in dealing with that feedback.

## 英作文（プロセス・ライティング）のための適切なフィードバックと、学生がフィードバックを有効に生かすための訓練について

Neil Cowie

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# Students of process writing need appropriate and timely feedback on their work, and in addition, training in dealing with that feedback.

Neil Cowie

## 1:1 Background Situation

In this paper I will try to explore one specific methodological issue arising from my writing class in the Liberal Arts Faculty of Saitama University. The issue concerns how a teacher can best respond to his/her students' writing (feedback). My aims (detailed below) are to give practical suggestions concerning the what, when, and how of feedback. It is my hope that this practical approach will be based on current theories of language teaching and will be of some interest to fellow teachers.

I would like to focus on an introductory writing class for undergraduates (second to fourth years) of mixed ability. There were thirty students in the class who met once a week for an academic year (twenty six times). Comments received from the students in a post-course evaluation indicated a number of positive aspects to the course and several areas that needed to be changed.

The positive comments remarked mainly on the atmosphere in the class: positive, friendly, and supportive for example. The criticisms focused on a number of aspects of the course content: *"purpose not always clear"; "would like more grammar"*, for example. There were a number of comments which coincided with my own evaluation concerning rewriting and responses to writing *(feedback)*. My original aim was to teach a *"process writing"* course with an emphasis on ideas generation, organisation and rewriting (Raimes 1983). The comments of my students confirmed my own dissatisfaction with the outcome. Students did very little rewriting (if any) and were certainly confused as to what to do with the feedback they did receive.

### 1:1:1 Aims

In this paper I will try to answer the following questions:

1. *Is feedback necessary in the writing process?*
2. *Are there any particular ways of giving feedback that are better than others?*

3. *Is it better to give feedback at one particular stage or another?*
4. *In what ways can students deal with the feedback that they receive?*

## 1:2 Process Writing

Firstly I would like to clarify what I mean by the writing process. This is an approach to writing which (theoretically) emphasises a cycle of ideas generation, selection and organisation, and then drafting. Papers are redrafted after a response from peers or the teacher or both. Students will (theoretically) rewrite their papers several times. In some approaches students are given the option to rewrite their papers indefinitely until they are satisfied with the result. In others students produce a portfolio of papers from which a selection are graded. In my case there was certainly an emphasis on ideas generation and peer and teacher response, but very little rewriting. I think this was because I left it to the students whether to rewrite or not, and it was not made an integral part of the course. So I think a main part of my problem in giving feedback was a *"reflection of the course setting and teaching environment"* (Ferris 1995). I simply did not make it clear to students how they should react to feedback and rewrite accordingly.

## 2:1 Does feedback make any difference to the quality of student writing?

I would now like to look at feedback itself in more detail. A number of researchers have asked the question as to whether feedback (and particularly error correction) makes any difference to student writing. Zamel (1985) analysed the *"responding behaviours"* of E.F.L. teachers and showed that they often responded inaccurately and inconsistently. Teacher comments were often vague, unclear, unspecific and in many cases simply wrong. An important finding, and one that is paralleled in L1 settings (Leki 1990), is that teachers overwhelmingly responded to *"surface errors"* rather than *"global concerns"*. Surface errors are those connected to grammar, syntax, spelling, and so on; whereas global concerns include such things as overall organisation, signposting, cohesion, and clarity of meaning. This is often characterized as form versus content and it is an important distinction. Zamel found that teachers would respond as language teachers rather than writing teachers, and would attend to sentence level mechanics rather than *"higher order concerns"* (Keh 1992). Upon reflection, I too reacted largely in this way.

## 2:2 Surface errors versus global concerns in giving feedback

This distinction between surface errors and global concerns seems particularly important in process writing when students should rewrite their papers a number of times. If students are directed to alter global concerns then it is likely they will rewrite a number of their sentences. If they had made errors at the sentence level these errors would perhaps disappear or change in the rewriting stage. A reorganized paper would probably have different sentences with different grammar and different problems. Comment at an early stage on surface errors would probably be made redundant by later changes. It would be better to focus, at least in earlier drafts, on global matters or as Zamel said *"to respond to the writer rather than the writing"* (Zamel 1985).

## 2:3 Some evidence that feedback does not improve student writing

In many cases then, it would appear that feedback from teachers tends to be vague and often wrong. However even if it is appropriate, it is not always clear how students respond to it. Both Raimes (1983), and Semke (1984) (as noted by Cohen 1987), concluded that feedback was often ignored or not acted upon by students (as in my case). However such conclusions are intuitive. I would now like to look at three studies which test more empirically what students do with feedback, and whether it is thought to be useful or not.

### 2:3:1 Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1986)

Firstly a study by Robb et al.(1986) focused on the impact different types of feedback had on writing quality. This study was trying to get evidence to see if feedback is useful in improving writing quality. The researchers chose four different types of feedback, ranging from what they termed most to least salient. The most salient was the *'correction'* group, followed by *'coded'*, *'uncoded'*, and finally *'marginal'* feedback. Students assigned to the four groups were given five narrative test compositions during the academic year. These were graded for both grammar and content. The results suggested that writing will improve through the practice of writing itself rather than because of any particular type of feedback. The authors concluded that teachers would be best advised to spend their time responding to global concerns rather than detailed sentence level mechanics.

### 2:3:2 Cohen (1987)

In another study, Cohen (1987) gave a self report questionnaire to students in order to find out what type of feedback teachers gave and then what the students did with it. The answers to the first question backed up Zamel's findings: that teachers tended to focus on surface errors rather than global concerns. However what was interesting was that students wanted both types of feedback. With regard to the second question, although 80% or so of students did respond in some way to the feedback given, there were still 20% who did not even reread their papers never mind respond to the feedback given. This gives some statistical evidence to back up Raimes' and Semke's intuitive conclusions that students do not always respond to feedback.

Cohen also asked his students to self rate themselves as learners. The self rated better learners would tend to make a mental note of teacher comments, whilst the poorer learners would be more likely to rewrite their papers. It is difficult to know what to make of this finding. One would perhaps expect better learners to be more proactive in dealing with their feedback ie, one would expect them to be the ones to rewrite their papers but this was not the case. Cohen's conclusion was, that whatever the self rated level of students, all of them had relatively few strategies to deal with the feedback given (*"making a mental note"* was the most common response). The key points from this study would seem to be that students expect feedback on both surface errors and global concerns, and they need training in how to deal with it.

### 2:3:3 Fathman and Whalley (1990)

A similar result was reported by Fathman and Whalley (1990). They took four types of feedback (none, grammar only, content only, both grammar and content) and applied them to four groups of students. The students were given a thirty minute writing task. The papers were then assigned to one of the four different types of feedback, marked and returned a few days later. The students were then asked to rewrite their papers. Independent raters then marked the papers for grammar and content. Fathman and Whalley suggested that their results show *"both grammar and content feedback, whether given alone or simultaneously, positively affect rewriting"*. But their results also show that the *"no feedback"* group also improved writing scores. This could suggest that it is the act of rewriting itself which is just as important, if not more important, than any kind of teacher intervention.

Whereas Robb et al. (1986) and Cohen (1987) are somewhat negative about the usefulness of feedback, Fathman and Whalley (with similar results) choose to be optimistic.

Comparing these three papers, it would seem that it could be a matter of interpretation as to whether feedback has either no beneficial effect, or, that feedback of any kind will improve student writing. However Ferris (1995) has another view. Ferris felt that the whole teaching environment had more effect on students' writing rather than just feedback, and that given the right circumstances feedback is valid and worthwhile. I will look first at Ferris' own study and then another by Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) which give some evidence for feedback having a positive impact on student writing.

## 2:4 Some evidence that feedback is useful in improving writing

### 2:4:1 Ferris (1995)

Ferris (1995) examined what students and teachers felt about feedback in *"multiple draft settings"*. She chose multiple draft settings on the basis that almost all previous studies had examined students in single draft contexts (she mentions Radecki and Swales (1988); Leki (1991); Hedgcock and Leftkowitz (1994) as examples). This is an important point if one is to treat feedback as an integral part of a write and rewrite process. Certainly my own students were working in a single draft context for much of the time. Ferris found that students pay more attention to feedback in preliminary drafts as opposed to later drafts. She also found that students can respond not only to grammar errors but also to comments on ideas and organisation. One particularly important observation was that students responded to (and appreciated) positive comments very clearly indeed. However, in an echo of Zamel's work 10 years earlier, the students did record a number of problems in understanding their teachers' comments. The most important conclusion was that feedback should be given early in the writing process when students are still willing to make major changes to their work.

### 2:4:2 Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990)

Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) also found that students paid attention to feedback and found it useful. In a relatively small study (3 teachers and 9 students), but in three different university settings, Cohen and Cavalcanti found that *'interactive'* feedback (ie, feedback as part of a rewrite process) did improve student writing. The students welcomed the feedback because of the beneficial effects it had on their writing. Because of these findings the authors recommended a number of ways in which teachers could make feedback effective. These included: the need for praise; the need for specific information on content; and the need to train students in learning strategies for dealing with feedback (in particular the strategy of rewriting). I would

like to return to the issue of learning strategies later in this paper.

### 2:5 Summary of research findings on feedback

I would now like to highlight what I think are some of the more important conclusions to be drawn from the above research.

1. It may be that the most important strategy for improving writing is the act of rewriting itself regardless of the type of feedback.
2. There is some evidence that different types of feedback have little or no effect on writing quality, but this may be connected to the total teaching environment rather than feedback itself.
3. Teachers generally have a tendency to respond to surface errors rather than global concerns, and this may be ineffective in a process writing course where students are expected to rewrite papers several times.
4. Teachers' feedback is often vague, unclear and inaccurate.
5. Students often do not respond to feedback or have a limited number of strategies for doing so. This seems to be particularly true in single draft contexts.
6. Students expect and will respond to feedback on surface errors, however they can respond to feedback on global concerns and particularly remember positive comments. This is especially true in multiple draft settings.

### 3:1 Some suggested classroom responses to the research findings

I will now outline some practical ways in which teachers can respond in the classroom to the above research findings. I will attempt to integrate the findings and recommendations of the existing literature into my responses (in particular: Allwright (1986), Connor and Farmer (1990), Charles (1990), and Keh (1990)). I will then try to show how different kinds of learner training can be incorporated into ways of giving feedback. My main focus will be on feedback (conclusions 2 to 6) but before then I would like to briefly examine the first conclusion regarding rewriting.

#### 3:1:1 Rewriting as the key to improving writing

The first statement, that rewriting is the main key to improving writing, concerns an overall approach to writing rather than just a focus on feedback. It may be that my personal organisation of the writing course was typical of many of the teachers studied

in the research. Although I was teaching a *"process"* writing class, in reality it was still focused on one final product, and little or no valid rewriting was going on. If, as seems to be clear, rewriting is fundamental to the improvement of student writing skills then it must become integral to a process writing course. I have just started a new year of the same course and one of my main aims is to make rewriting a key focus for the students. My plan is for the students to submit all the drafts of their papers so that I can monitor whether they do rewrite or not. They will also have far fewer assignments, but they will have to rewrite these several times. In this way I hope that rewriting will become a much more important component of the course.

### 3:2 Methods of giving feedback

I think the reservations of the remaining research findings (2 to 6) can be addressed if the following intuition takes place:

*That feedback will improve student writing if students are given appropriate and timely information, and are trained in ways to use it.*

I would like to use the next part of this paper to show how this might be achieved. I will try to draw from the literature various feedback methods and suggest ways in which they could be evaluated. I have chosen the following methods because I think they are interesting and also appropriate for large classes with little contact time. Another important reason to choose them is each method encourages students to be their own critics and to take control of their own learning.

#### 3:2:1 Reformulation (Allwright 1986)

Allwright (1986) (developing an original idea by Levenston (1978) and Cohen (1981)) outlines *"reformulation"* as being suitable for large classes. She also states that it is suitable for giving information on *"central issues of organisation without spoon feeding students"* Allwright (1986). The method is as follows: the teacher chooses a *"middle"* paper from the students and then rewrites it as a native speaker might. The class can then compare and contrast the original with the reformulated paper covering both surface errors and global concerns. The identity of the original student is kept hidden. Issues that arise in the discussion of the reformulated paper could then form the basis for the next lesson. Students will need to be trained in appropriate ways to discuss the reformulated paper (which may take some

time), but intuitively this method would appear to be an economical way of giving feedback to a large group in the classroom. The fact that feedback takes place in the classroom (as opposed, for example, to a student reading teacher comments alone) should increase the possibility of students paying attention to it. At least the teacher has a chance to monitor the feedback process, in contrast to the situation Cohen (1987) describes where 20% of students did not even reread their papers.

### 3:2:2 Topical Structure Analysis (Connor and Farmer 1990)

Connor and Farmer (1990) have developed *"Topical Structure Analysis"* (after Lautamatti (1978)) as a revision strategy and check for coherence in writing. Lautamatti identified three possible sentence progressions in a piece of writing: parallel, sequential, and extended parallel. Parallel sentence topics are identical; sequential sentence topics are different, and extended parallel topics interrupt sequences. Students identify sentence topics and draw them diagrammatically. In this way they can visually check the organisation of their paper.

Connor and Farmer suggest topical structure analysis is a useful revision tool for first drafts. They found that students improved their ability to organise their ideas, to focus on and develop topics, and to improve the coherence of their writing. The teacher needs to clearly show the students the technique for analysing their own writing, but once this has been learnt the students are, to some extent, autonomous in checking their own writing.

### 3:2:3 Student Self Monitoring (Charles 1990)

Charles (1990) describes a very interesting way in which she responds to her students' writing. Once students have drafted a paper they make comments on it in the margin. The comments refer to concerns that students have when writing the paper, and so could be about surface errors or global concerns. The teacher then responds to these comments (not the paper itself), and students subsequently rewrite the paper.

Charles admits she has only tried the technique with advanced groups and that it needs replicating at other levels and in other classroom settings. However it would seem that the technique has a number of advantages that would make it worthwhile pursuing.

These advantages are:

1. The teacher can be very specific about responding to the students' problems (avoiding some of Zamel's (1985) criticisms).

2. The teacher can view the paper '*in action*' and glimpse the students' intentions more easily.
3. Students may raise issues not normally commented on, and that the teacher may be unaware of.

The result of this should be that the feedback is much more focused on the students' concerns and therefore more likely to be acted upon. This of course would need to be verified experimentally. Although this method is potentially time consuming (as it is a type of teacher comment) I feel that comments would be focused only on the students' concerns and not the paper as a whole. Therefore it is likely that it would not take as much time to check as a full response to the whole paper would.

**3:2:4 Peer Response (Keh 1990)**

Keh (1990) suggests '*peer response*' (where students critique each others' work) as a fourth way to give feedback. In the early stages of a course students need to be given guidelines as to how to respond to their peers. White and Arndt (1991) give examples of such possible guidelines (examples include questions on the writer's purpose, clarity of sentence topic and clarity of connectors). The guidelines can be less structured as the course and the students' skill progresses. Students also need (as with all the other methods) to be trained to focus on global concerns (Keh terms them *'higher order concerns'*). Students should be taught to become familiar with concepts and vocabulary, such as cohesion and logic for example. As with reformulation (Allwright 1986) students need to discuss one another's work, and issues arising from the discussion can form a basis for the next lesson's work.

Peer response is of course a standard part of a conversational English class, but it can be problematic in a writing class where students may feel reluctant to criticise or comment on each others' work. Mangelsdorf(1992) asked a variety of students what they felt about peer response in writing classes. Overall the message was very positive. Students were made aware of writing for another audience beyond the teacher. They also appreciated and felt they benefited from their peers' comments. One warning from the Japanese students in the study was the apparent reluctance to accept criticism from anybody except the teacher. However the number of students monitored was small and may not be representative of Japanese students as a whole. My own experience has been that Japanese students are willing to discuss and criticise each others' work as long as the purpose is made clear and that they are given training to do so.

I would like at this point to mention the work of Hinds (1987), as noted by Johns (1990), and Mauranen (1993), as noted by Bloor (1994). These writers classified different societies as being either *'reader'* or *'writer responsible'* societies. It may possible that Japan is a reader responsible society and that this could explain some of the reasons why, for example, my students' writing is often vague or lacking in signposting. The Japanese reader is expected to interpret the writing and not be led through by the writer. This is somewhat in contrast to a Western view of academic writing where the writer is responsible for guiding the reader. I mention this in connection to peer response as a possible general reason why some Japanese students do not always appear able to criticise each others' work. They have not been brought up to do so.

### 4:1 Evaluation of the feedback methods

The following are some suggestions for evaluating the above methods:

1. Outline to the students the emphasis in process writing of rewriting and ensure that this is an integral part of the course (I mentioned above making sure that all the students' drafts are monitored to ensure they actually do the rewriting).
2. Use a number of different feedback methods during the course and evaluate them using student self report forms (Cohen 1987). This would help indicate whether the students were more likely to respond to one way rather than another.
3. Use different feedback methods with different groups of students, and then compare both surface errors and global concerns to see if there was any inter group difference (Robb et al. 1986).

### 5:1 The role of learner strategy training in giving feedback

The above methods of giving feedback all involve learner training. I would now like to look at this in more detail because I think it is an important way for teachers to help students improve their writing.

Douglas Brown (1994) defines a learner strategy as *"a specific method of approaching a problem or task....they* (learner strategies) *are contextualised 'battle plans'"* (Douglas Brown 1994). There are specific *'battle plans'* integral to process writing; for example: how to generate ideas, brainstorming, reordering, and finding the main

focus. Cohen (1987) and Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) both conclude that students have limited strategies for dealing with the feedback they receive. These limited strategies include such things as making a mental note, asking others, and checking in a dictionary. What is not clear is which, if any, of these strategies are effective and which ones do better writers use. In any case I feel that such strategies are primarily concerned with surface errors and not global concerns. I have pointed out earlier that it is the revision of global concerns which is most important in giving feedback, so this leads to the question of what strategies could be taught to students to help them deal with global concerns?

**Rubin (1987) identified three broad categories of strategy:**

1) *Cognitive* (eg. guessing).
2) *Communication* (eg. staying in the conversation).
3) *Social* (eg. initiating conversations).

The examples are Rubin's own. She does not specifically mention writing but examples appropriate to writing could be: rewriting; being aware of the reader; finding a reason to write (journal or diary writing for example). However there is a fourth category of strategy mentioned by Rubin which seems particularly appropriate to feedback. These are *metacognitive strategies.* Rubin defines these as the ways in which students oversee, regulate and self direct their language learning (specific examples could include: what students know about how to learn a language, including the best way to write; how students choose and priorities their learning goals, including their writing goals; how students plan what they wish to learn, including how they plan their writing). I believe these broad skills are essential, both for successful learning in general, and for successful writing in particular. And these are the type of strategies that I will try to incorporate into my writing classes. I will now show how this might be done using some ideas outlined by Wenden (1991).

Wenden (1991) details a number of ways in which teachers can introduce general strategy training into the classroom, as well as specific metacognitive strategies. These ways include: assessing what strategies students already use; focusing on and emphasising the most beneficial strategies; explicitly teaching other strategies. Wenden has a number of tasks, questionnaires, and guides for action plans to enable the teacher to do this.

I have recently introduced some of these metacognitive strategy guides into my

lessons. Although it is too early to make a firm judgement, my initial impression is that most of the best learners already use good metacognitive strategies. But, there seems to be some scope to teach the weaker students who should benefit most from such training. The most difficult task would appear to be how to teach metacognitive strategies to the weaker learners without alienating the stronger students who already use effective strategies. This is one area I hope to examine more in the future.

## 6:0 Principles of effective feedback

By way of a conclusion I would like to return to the original questions I asked in my aims (1:1:1). I will summarise my findings and list what I think are the principles of effective feedback.

### *1. Is feedback necessary in the writing process ?*

The research literature had differing answers to this question. There was some evidence that feedback was not useful (Robb et al. 1986; Cohen 1987); but there was also contrasting evidence that it was useful (Cohen and Cavalcanti 1990; Ferris 1995); and finally other conclusions that lay somewhere in the middle (Fathman and Whalley 1990). My own feeling is that appropriate and timely feedback can improve student writing, and I summarise how below. It is also important that students both expect and want feedback, so if this is denied to them it may have negative repercussions for the rest of the course. I wonder if students will take a teacher seriously who does not give any feedback at all? Possibly not.

### *2. Are there ways of giving feedback which are better than others ?*

Feedback can be given in a variety of ways (and I detailed what I thought were some interesting alternatives to traditional teacher comments and conferencing). I would like to draw from the research what would appear to be some sound principles for giving feedback whatever method is chosen.

**These principles are; that feedback should:**

a) focus on *global concerns* rather than surface errors (although errors should not be ignored completely).
b) be directly connected to *student concerns wherever possible.*
c) be *clear, specific* and *related to lesson objectives.*

d) be *positive* as well as pointing out error.

***3. Is it better to give feedback at one particular stage or another ?***

It seems that students pay more attention to feedback given on *earlier drafts* when they are more willing to make substantive changes.

***4. Are there ways in which students can be taught to deal with the feedback they receive ?***

It may be that *rewriting* is the most important strategy students could learn to improve their writing. I suggested that the *metacognitive strategies* of over seeing, regulating and self directing would be particularly appropriate to incorporate into a writing course. It is these skills which are fundamental to students being responsible for their own learning which should be a major goal for any teacher.

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